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THE YEAR IN REVIEW: 1996

Samir SANBAR, United Nations Assistant Secretary-General for Public Information, comments on the election of the new United Nations Secretary-General as well as on the major events of 1996 as seen from a United Nations perspective.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is a special edition of World Chronicle.

As 1996 came to a close, the United Nations selected a new Secretary-General, Kofi Annan of Ghana. Mr. Annan, a 30-year veteran of the world organization, was most recently United Nations Under Secretary-General for Peace-keeping Operations.

Here with me today to discuss significant events of 1996 as well as the selection of the new Secretary-General is Samir Sanbar, Assistant Secretary-General for Public Information. But before I talk with Mr. Sanbar, let's look at a video reviewing major events of the past year as seen from a United Nations perspective.

NARRATION: The United Nations began its second half-century in a mood of determination. With celebrations of the Organisation's fiftieth anniversary now over, 1996 brought sharp scrutiny, and an unprecedented squeeze on resources. The UN had hard choices to make in 1996, among them finding new ways to meet its challenges.

Preventing war and upholding peace are prime missions for the UN, but 1996 saw some tough lessons being applied—lessons learned through difficult experiences. It often meant going back to basics, as senior peace-keeping official Iqbal Riza acknowledged.

IQBAL RIZA: "We will have a far lower number of soldiers deployed, and mostly in the classical, traditional peace-keeping operations that we have come to manage with success, rather than being catapulted into war situations where peace-keeping forces cannot discharge the mandate that they are given."

NARRATION: In former Yugoslavia, diplomatic efforts finally produced agreement to end the fighting. UN peacekeepers had struggled to maintain a lifeline to people trapped by war. With the peace accord, the UN force in Bosnia handed over to the NATO-led Implementation Force.

The UN took on new roles – like providing an International Police Task Force for Bosnia. It monitored community situations made tense by refugees and residents of different ethnic make-up living in close proximity.

Elsewhere in the devastated Balkans, the UN took over as the Transitional Administration of Eastern Slavonia, a region of Croatia which had been seized by Serb forces. The task was to reintegrate the territory with the rest of Croatia peacefully.

In this, a more tightly focused effort than before, the UN disarmed rival factions. To deter hostile action the force was strongly armed, but its greatest strength was work to restore public confidence, feed the hungry, reconstruct war-shattered roads and bridges, and encourage new dialogue between former enemies.

In Angola, a welcome peace – though fragile – followed 20 years of civil war, and UN peacekeepers performed their familiar tasks of supervising the disarming and demobilisation of warring factions. But they also instructed former fighters in clearing landmines – sometimes ones planted by the fighters' own factions. And in a new departure the UN helped establish training workshops where ex-soldiers could learn civilian skills. Their successful reintegration into normal work-life could help to assure a lasting peace.

In Guatemala there was a peace mission with a difference. A civil war which had lasted 34 years was brought to a negotiated end in 1996. Reconciliation was encouraged by the special emphasis the UN placed on building respect for human rights.

Following the restoration of democracy in Haiti, UN personnel stayed on to help overhaul the country's administration, working to meet people's basic needs, and so counteract generations of governmental neglect.

Besides peace-keeping, the UN's humanitarian work came under great strain. Two years of coping with the aftermath of genocide in Rwanda, and its wider impact on the Great Lakes region of Africa, led in 1996 to a comprehensive review of emergency assistance. It recognised that, while international action had saved many

lives and mitigated suffering, it was clear that increased preparedness and better emergency planning could have achieved much more.

Fresh challenges came in 1996 with renewed outbursts of violence, this time in Zaire, involving the same rival ethnic groupings and Zairian rebels. Much-needed relief for uprooted refugees was sent in by international agencies. And the Security Council authorised a supporting multinational force.

The UN's Humanitarian Affairs Department set up new systems to improve the delivery of relief, including access through the Internet to an enhanced database known as "Relief Web". For a complex emergency like Zaire, the efficient flow of information between all the participants, such as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the many private aid groups involved, is vital; and the Web speeds the process and increases co-ordination.

The UN system as a whole in 1996 came under the severest financial pressure in its history.

In New York, host city to the headquarters building, and all around the world, citizens held vigils on the UN's 51st anniversary. They were expressing their support for the Organisation in its cash crisis, and urging their Governments to fulfil their financial obligations to the world body. Member countries' debt to the UN, in unpaid membership contributions, amounted to $2.5 billion in 1996.

The Organisation, for its part, embarked on a massive programme of cost-cutting. This involved a continuous Efficiency Review, which achieved an 11 per cent reduction in staffing levels and a 27 per cent cut in paperwork. The commitment to overall reform was stressed by the President of the General Assembly in 1996, Razali Ismail of Malaysia.

RAZALI ISMAIL: "Reform is something that everybody accepts. Reform – and it means looking at the financial situation, looking at the various bodies of the UN, whether they are able to deliver what they are supposed to do, and looking at the decision-making processes."

NARRATION: Economic pressure was felt also in the field of development – the continuing battle against world poverty. Funds flowing into UN programmes and agencies declined dramatically, even though more and more needs were identified.

Development assistance from the world's richer countries fell to less than 0.3 per cent of those countries' gross national product – so low a figure that the Secretary-General expressed alarm.

BOUTROS BOUTROS-GHALI: "Overall trends in this respect are a matter of concern. The level of resources is declining just at a time when there is renewed consensus on policies and renewed commitments. There is also a growing gap between resources flows and demands."

NARRATION: Because of these demands, the work had to go on, whatever the cash constraints. Often new strategies were adopted to overcome the difficulties.

An example was in Laos, one of the world's poorest countries. UN agencies encouraged farmers to diversify their sources of income. Smallholders were trained to use their land for several purposes at once – employing existing rice-fields and ponds, but also breeding fish, and even adding poultry-farming, which in turn provided fertiliser for the fish ponds. With programmes like this spreading across the world, the UN declared 1996 International Year for the Eradication of Poverty.

Self-help was also the essence of UN-aided community development, like this example in Brazil. The World Bank, part of the UN system, supported a project in the lush but poverty-stricken north-eastern region. Here local people decided themselves how profits should be used from their town's main income-earner – a brick factory. Money from it was ploughed into polishing locally-mined gemstones – a further source of revenue – and into a well-equipped rural hospital.

But half the world's population live in cities, and that figure is rising – by a million every week, and more people are migrating from the countryside. In the search for new solutions to homelessness and poor housing, bad water supplies and sanitation, congested streets and overloaded transport systems, the UN convened the second Habitat conference in 1996. Informally called the City Summit, the Habitat gathering

in Istanbul encouraged a growing trend for Governments and the private sector to work together for the better management of cities, even in harsh economic climates.

Food was the subject of another world summit in 1996, this one held in Rome. Over a hundred national leaders pledged to reduce the number of the world's hungry people by half over the next two decades.

Fighting poverty and promoting peace while available resources were drying up was difficult enough for the UN. But in ever-expanding areas the Organisation was called upon to do still more work—such as the rapidly growing task of fostering democracy.

In 1996, 25 countries made new requests for UN help in running their elections. In Western Sahara, the UN had already been working for five years to bring about a referendum to help end a long-running territorial dispute. Disagreement over just who was eligible to vote delayed the process. The UN worked to facilitate contact between the parties until the identification process could be resumed.

The global fight against drug-trafficking was another responsibility the UN carried out away from the headlines. The UN's resource crisis was addressed innovatively here; its Drug Control Programme was partly funded by assets seized from convicted drug-runners.

Combatting environmental crime also increased in priority. In Italy, with the backing of a UN anti-crime unit, police investigated illegal mining and massive waste dumps. The police could also trace the lucrative proceeds of such illicit dumping, when organised-crime bosses built themselves luxurious villas nearby.

The UN increasingly upheld other aspects of international law. Investigations of crimes against humanity were undertaken (including, for the first time, the crime of rape as a weapon of war), and prosecutions were conducted, by the International Criminal Tribunals for former Yugoslavia and for Rwanda.

A new form of global law-enforcement was upheld by the continuing UN Special Commission in Iraq, established after the Gulf War. Under its mandate from the Security Council to eradicate Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, the Commission uncovered a facility for biological weapons development—and oversaw its destruction.

The UN also pursued disarmament at a worldwide, governmental level. 1996 marked a major breakthrough. The Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty on nuclear weapons was finally completed after years of negotiation, and signed by over a 120 nations.

The treaty outlawing chemical weapons, too, reached a landmark. In 1996 a total of 65 nations ratifying the treaty was reached, so triggering its entry into force as international law.

And across the globe the UN accelerated efforts to remove one of the worst evils of war – landmines, with their lingering legacies of death and injury. Forty countries committed to a total ban on mines.

Another priority in 1996 was ensuring that women take a fuller role in society. Even in deeply traditional societies, UN programmes – energised by the previous year's World Conference on Women in Beijing, China – encouraged women in playing more active parts, and sometimes taking the lead.

In Afghanistan, a country torn apart by a war leaving many widows, UN personnel worked side-by-side with local women, as in this village, where women gained a greater say with elders while the community reconstructed and improved its sanitation, healthcare and education. But when a firmly tradition-minded faction took over the country's capital, the UN's efforts in support of women met a setback. The Secretary-General warned that discriminatory policies could have serious repercussions on the UN's delivery of relief and reconstruction.

With children, too, the UN worked in new directions. The special agency for children, UNICEF, was 50 years old in 1996. Long known for its support of young people's basic needs – like vaccination and nutrition – UNICEF placed a greater emphasis on children's Rights.

The UN system worked to combat sexual exploitation of young people as well as their use as slave labour in many countries. Even in the midst of a civil war, as in southern Sudan, UN workers insisted upon a young person's right to education; child soldiers in a rebel army were able to make the choice to be a student.

Rehabilitation programmes tackled the tragedy of an estimated quarter of a million children being used as soldiers. A wide-ranging UN study on children in armed conflict was headed by Graca Machel of Mozambique.

GRACA MACHEL: "How do you bring together again these social and cultural values so that children will find in adults the reference they need to develop and to have the safety, the internal safety, of believing in adults and believing in society?"

NARRATION: Just how we bring up our children will fundamentally affect the future of societies everywhere. And ensuring a future of peace and continuing development worldwide will remain, for the United Nations, a powerful challenge calling for dedicated effort and tough choices.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is a special edition of World Chronicle. Our guest is Samir Sanbar, United Nations Assistant Secretary-General for Public Information.

Mr. Sanbar, as we've just seen in that video, it's been another busy and very difficult year for the United Nations, winding up with the election of the new Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, who'll be the Secretary-General until the end of 2001. Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali was thought to have to some extent alienated the United States, and this was why he was not supported by the United States for reappointment. And he was said not to have done a very good job of projecting the UN to the American people; as a result there was a negative perception of the Organization. How do you see the new Secretary-General performing in these areas? Do you think that he's going to be able to restore "confidence", quote-unquote, in the United States and among the other major developed countries?

SANBAR: Well, as you will appreciate, I will not enter into the first part of the argument; I'll go into the area of the new Secretary-General, Mr. Kofi Annan. He is a colleague who knows the UN very well, who has dealt with peace-keeping, and not just peace-keeping, but all other areas, very capable and recognized by Member States as well as by their staff for being a very capable colleague. I assume that his effort will be to try, as he has said himself, to heal the differences available so that he could advance forward to prepare the United Nations to enter the 21st century with the most qualified staff in the most efficient manner.

LITTLEJOHNS: As we mentioned in the introduction, Kofi Annan is a long-time international civil servant—he joined the World Health Organization I believe in 1962 as a young administrative officer. And of course you have been a colleague of his for a number of years. Would you say that this is a help or a handicap in his new role?

SANBAR: I would certainly say it's a help. The United Nations, as you yourself know, having been an experienced journalist and observer of the UN for many years, is a very unique place. It is going into uncharted territory in a very quickly changing world, advancing to a whole new century. To be able to advance effectively, you've got to have the approval of Member States to advance, the participation of the staff, and an acute—a very good knowledge of the world which is around you. And someone like Kofi Annan, who knows the UN, who has the confidence of Member States, who voted unanimously for him, is capable of finding his way to prepare the UN to enter the 21st century. I would mention here one very important element. Over 75 per cent of the UN budget is staff. If the staff are not mobilized to prepare the road to the 21st century or to strengthen the UN, it will be very difficult for the UN to develop in that direction. Someone who knows the staff, who is liked by the staff and respected by the staff, will be able to proceed along those lines; who also knows where the strengths, knows where the weakness lies. If there are certain staff that are the problem, the bulk of the staff are the solution. And they have to participate in it.

LITTLEJOHNS: It's been said that staff morale is about as low as it's ever been. Do you think that one of Mr. Annan's priorities is going to be to change that? Perhaps even his top priority after the financial question.

SANBAR: Well, I would not speak for Mr. Annan, but I am sure that—

LITTLEJOHNS: He is, after all, a former director of personnel.

SANBAR: Exactly. Having been in personnel, in budget, and above all a very respected and dedicated staff member who devoted his life, in fact risked his career for the UN, he will certainly try his best to mobilize the staff—

LITTLEJOHNS: Why do you say risked his career?

SANBAR: No, risked his life for the UN, meaning when you go to the front, and you are in areas of conflict and—

LITTLEJOHNS: Oh, I see. Yes.

SANBAR: —and likely attacks by anybody. When you go to Bosnia, when you go to the south of Lebanon, when you go anywhere where there is fighting, you are risking your life. Hence, if you risk your life you are risking your career. Obviously. So somebody who really works with the support of the staff, and in areas where he knows where the staff are and who could work and do what, will be able to mobilize the staff, I think.

LITTLEJOHNS: You, as the head of Public Information, are dealing all the time with the media, and it was said that the media had, to some extent, particularly in the United States, demonized Boutros-Ghali. Now, I'm not sure whether you would agree with that, but how can Kofi Annan be undemonized?

SANBAR: Well, I don't think the media demonized Boutros-Ghali, I think there were press reports one way or the other. I mean, there were lots of conflicting signals from the press. There was a trend which was attacking the UN itself, and one which was attacking the Secretary-General, and a third which was attacking the person of the occupant of the post. I think Kofi Annan, who has a public outreach sense, who is not new in that area of dealing with the media, dealing with the public—after all, peace-keeping is a major area of UN activities, and in fact it's a most vulnerable area of UN activities—he has been dealing with it successfully.

LITTLEJOHNS: I must say as a journalist he's been very open in the past and very accessible on the whole.

SANBAR: I come to a point which maybe you are not addressing but which I would really raise, and support, and that is the public information culture which is required at the UN. And we in the media area have been struggling with that aspect, trying to build, strengthen and consolidate a public information culture. And someone who has been open to the media and considers the media as his ally, who is an ally of the UN, is likely to get the media to support the UN. And it's very important to have that role, the perception of the media as an ally, in this new stage.

LITTLEJOHNS: The video we've just been watching is quite heavy in its content on the various, what one might call, social activities of the United Nations—improving society, matters like feeding, humanitarianism and so on, human rights. Do you think that the UN is going to get more and more into this and less and less into peace-keeping in the future?

SANBAR: I would say there is more to the UN than meets the eye of the camera. It's been for a while that the UN has been involved in social and economic areas. In fact, about 70 per cent of the budget is in economic and social work. Only sometimes there is this cynical theory that good news is no news, and it has not been reported well. The UN in fact is involved in that area. It doesn't make headlines every time you do a good story.

LITTLEJOHNS: So only the bad news gets into the television programmes.

SANBAR: Exactly. But we try to make tomorrow's headline better by taking action today in good areas. And this is a challenge in fact for all of us, how to make good news printable in front pages, or in at least back pages. And in that regard I would say that, for example, the international conference on social development in Copenhagen [World Summit on Social Development, Copenhagen, 1995] was very instrumental in having leading newspapers get into UN issues like development. I recall the *Financial Times* and others have covered extensively that approach and that area of social development, and I think the more we get into these areas, and the more we have permanent delegates and others speak on the area, on the subject, the more we have the media deal with us.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Sanbar, what do you reckon were the major achievements of the United Nations in 1996?

SANBAR: I think a part of it is strengthening the awareness, or sharpening the awareness on issues of international concern like those which were raised by these international conferences; I would think dealing with peace-keeping and with issues – humanitarian issues which did not always get the headlines. After all, there are at least 17 areas in which the UN is involved in helping –

LITTLEJOHNS: Peace-keeping.

SANBAR: Peace-keeping and humanitarian assistance. And emergency relief. And that is an important area. In our field, communications, I think we have gone into information technology and managed to reach out to the widest possible public through information technology, electronic media, and strengthening the partnerships with the media organizations, with Member States, with civic society. I think one of the achievements of the UN which is progressing, and should continue, is opening up the UN to civic societies to have them involved in our main issues.

LITTLEJOHNS: We only have a few seconds left. Do you think the financial crisis is going to be resolved in the next few months, with the advent of the new Secretary-General?

SANBAR: I think everybody should be upbeat about what we are going to obtain within the next few years, advancing into the 21st century, as we all say, in an optimistic mood whereby I am sure we'll get the support of everyone concerned.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Sanbar, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle**.

Our guest has been Samir Sanbar, Assistant Secretary-General for Public Information. I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle**.

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